

'Knock on wood:!' Some nursing homes have dodged the viral bullet through hard work, and some good luck

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"Knock on wood, but we have had no issues with the virus."

It was April 1, and Harlie Clark, administrator at Crest Manor nursing home in Perinton, was cautiously applauding the accomplishments of his team.

Two weeks later, as the coronavirus continued to spread through the Rochester region, it was the same refrain at Crest Manor.

"Thank God I can still say 'Knock on wood.' We have no cases. We've tested three people and they've come negative," Clark said earlier this week.

Untold numbers of residents of elder-care facilities throughout New York state have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and more than 3,000 have died. There have been large and deadly outbreaks in homes, including several in the Rochester area.

But at the same time, some nursing homes have managed to avoid the coronavirus scourge. They credit hard work, attention to detail and the support of the families whose loved ones are residents.

And one more thing. "I'm going to tell you a lot of it has been luck," Clark said.

The UR Medicine operates three skilled nursing facilities - Highlands at Brighton, Highlands Living Center in Pittsford and M.M. Ewing Continuing Care Center in Canandaigua.

None have recorded a single case of COVID-19.

Being part of the region's largest health-care system has helped, giving nursing-home managers access to internal expertise. They've reached out to counterparts in the hardest-hit parts of the country to ask what worked and what didn't.

But they attribute most of their success today to the work of their staffs, who have taken to heart advice about how to keep the coronavirus at bay.

"We've investing a lot of time in face-to-face education and video education in the proper use of personal protective equipment," said Dr. Joseph Nicholas, medical director of the Highlands at Brighton.

The education goes far beyond that. Cleanliness is a topic, and not just within the facility but without. "How we interact in the community is a risk factor," Nicholas said. Employees have been urged to "think about their regular life and not let their guard down when they leave the nursing home."

Daily education

They've also been urged not to relax at work, either. "We've spent a lot of time in the last couple of weeks reinforcing to the staff that when they're not caring for residents, they need to socially distance and wash hands," he said.

"We've gone to the point of removing many of the chairs in the conference rooms and staff areas and designating where they should sit" in order to keep staff from congregating, said Elisa Chambery, administrator of the Highlands Living Center.

"We're really appreciative of our staff," she said. "It's so difficult right now."

At Crest Manor in Perinton, too, the staff has absorbed similar lessons.

"It's daily education and just constantly telling the staff 'Wash your hands.' We can't say it enough here," Clark said. "We're constantly cleaning the environment. Everybody is scrubbing, including myself. We'll do doorknobs, the keypad to the time clock.

"It's just being highly alert while we're in the facility. Thankfully everybody has their arms around it."

Three Crest Manor residents who showed signs of illness were tested for coronavirus as a precaution, with negative results. Twenty-nine residents of the UR facilities also have been tested negative, and their symptoms were ascribed to other causes.

Clark said Crest Manor is trying to keep their staff with the same assignments every day, rather than rotate them to different tasks in different parts of the home. That practice is recommended to maintain the quality of care — and also to keep any infection that gets in from spreading throughout the home.

That prospect — that the coronavirus will worm its way past their defenses, despite their best efforts — keeps nursing home staff awake at night.

"We have to remain humble. We are all working very hard and diligently," said Walt Winiarczyk, administrator of the Highlands at Brighton. "But when I think of our three homes with no cases — it still seems it is possible it could sneak in. It's such an invisible, deadly virus."

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